

Making Reading Meaningful

Even before they can read, children should see reading as a way to explore the human adventure.

Ruth Shagoury

Head Start teacher Kelly Petrin sits in the rocking chair with a book on her lap. Twenty 4- and 5-year-old children wiggle on the floor and turn their eyes toward her. She begins:

We've been reading lots of books lately. Scary books with monsters like *Where the Wild Things Are* and silly books like *Llama Llama, Mad at Mama*. Today we're going to read a different kind of book called *The Teddy Bear*. I want you to listen carefully and pay attention to how it makes you feel. And look carefully at the pictures. Your feelings don't talk very loud, so listen hard.

The room is silent as the children anticipate the story.

"The Teddy Bear," Kelly reads, and holds up the first page so all can see. She reads the tale of a young boy's connection to his teddy bear. One day the boy loses the bear, which ends up in the garbage. Enter an old man in a long green coat who rifles through garbage cans.

Ivy looks carefully at the pictures and announces, "He's like people who don't have a home. I feel sad for him."

A few pages later, the picture shows the little boy sitting on his bed looking out the window. "How do you think he feels?" asks Kelly.

"Sad and lonely," Brayden responds.

"How can you tell?"

Nori chimes in: "'Cause he has a tear on his face."

"I'll bet he's wondering where his teddy bear is," Kelly goes on. "Did you hear that line? 'It was the first time he went to



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bed without his teddy bear.' Why is the boy sad?"

"He misses his teddy bear," Isabelle offers.

Ivy takes it further: "And the teddy bear's sad 'cause he misses the boy."

Connecting to Children's Lives

These preschoolers are performing an action that's at the heart of reading comprehension—making human connections to a story unfolding on the pages of a book. Whether they read to connect with the experiences that befall characters in a story or to gain information, solve a problem, or prepare to take some action, all readers need to connect the material in a text to their lives to understand what they read.

As a literacy researcher, I have spent the last six years observing in multilingual kindergarten and preschool classrooms like Kelly Petrin's class in Portland, Oregon. As I observe young children's emerging literacy and the different

ways teachers invite them into the world of reading, I have seen how teachers can emphasize such connections and foster comprehension with children right from the start, even as children are still learning to read.

Preschoolers bring a world of experience to the printed page. Early educators can introduce them to reading as a place to make meaning and explore the human adventure, to step into a story and make it their own. Our goal should be to help children approach books with the expectation of making sense, not simply making sounds (Lindfors, 2008).

Most teachers know the limitations of emphasizing phonics instruction without embedding it in the context of real reading. Stressing only decoding in the early grades can lead, by 3rd grade, to students who parrot back text with little understanding. Many teachers are also aware that research has uncovered important strategies students can use to learn from a text as they read it. The groundbreaking work of Keene and Zimmerman (2007) and Harvey and Goudvis (2007) has translated these findings into a collection of strategies for comprehension instruction that educators around the United States now use, such as connecting to background knowledge, making inferences, and summarizing (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2000).

But preschool and kindergarten teachers wonder how they can adapt these strategies to help students with little knowledge of the alphabet or phonics. More and more students come to their first school experience with scant background involving books or the English language. Yet it's crucial that we introduce preschoolers, even those still learning English, to reading as a meaning-making process that's connected to their lives (Cunningham & Shagoury, 2005). Teachers can do this: I have seen teachers stimulate

preschoolers to use strategies like making inferences and bringing their own life lessons to bear on a text in conjunction with the following practices.

Choosing Thoughtful Readalouds

Even at 4 and 5 years old, children can negotiate meaning using comprehension strategies. If teachers establish this meaning-seeking habit in students with the books that we read aloud to them, they will likely transfer this habit to their own reading once they can decode text on their own (Cunningham & Shagoury, 2005; Miller, 2002).

Kelly Petrin's readaloud of *The Teddy Bear* shows the rich conversation that is

possible with preschoolers. When Ivy notes that the man in the green coat is like people she has seen who are homeless, she is making a text-to-self connection, an important comprehension skill that activates schema (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). She also shows empathy and the ability to understand a character's perspective. Brayden and Nori are making inferences when they state that the little boy is sad, although the book does not contain that word. They use his tears as evidence and connect this detail to their own experiences of sadness.

Kelly plays a key role in making this readaloud stimulate true negotiation of

Good Classroom Readalouds

As the Crow Flies: A First Book of Maps. Gail Hartman and Harvey Stevenson. (1993). New York: Aladdin.

At the Beach. Huy Youn Lee. (1998). New York: Henry Holt.

Baby Rattlesnake. Lynn Moroney, Te Ata, and Mira Reisberg. (2006). New York: Children's Book Press.

The Day of Ahmed's Secret. Florence Parry Heide and Judy Heide Gilliland. (1990). New York: William Morrow.

Iguanas in the Snow and Other Winter Poems/ Iguana en la Nieve y Otras Poemas de Invierno. Francisco X. Alarcon and Maya Christina Gonzalez (2001). San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

In English, Of Course. Josephine Nobisso. (2002). Westhampton Beach, NY: Gingerbread House.

In My Family/En Mi Familia. Carmen Lomas Garcia. (2000). New York: Children's Book Press.

The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear. Don and Audrey Wood. (1997). New York: Masters Press.

Llama, Llama, Mad at Mama. Anna Dewdney. (2007). New York: Viking Juvenile.

Me on the Map. Joan Sweeney and Annette Cable. (1998). New York: Dragonfly Books.

Owl Moon. Jane Yolen. (1987). New York: Philomel.

Radio Man/Don Radio. Arthur Dorros. (1997). New York: Rayo.

Tar Beach. Faith Ringgold. (1991). New York: Random House.

The Teddy Bear. David McPhail. (2005). New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Too Many Tamales. Gary Soto. (1996). New York: Putnam Juvenile.

The Two Bobbies: A True Story of Hurricane Katrina, Friendship, and Survival. Kirby Larson and Mary Nethery. (2008). New York: Walker and Company.

Visiting Day. Jacqueline Woodson and James Ransome. (2007). New York: Scholastic.

meaning. She reads slowly, encourages the kids to make connections, and most important, chooses a text that has universal themes and an authentic storyline that fosters comprehension beyond the literal. Toward the end of *The Teddy Bear*, the man in the green coat loses the teddy and begins to wail. Kelly uses the word *wail* to help the children connect to another book they have read together, *Baby Rattlesnake*.

“Do you know what wailing is? Do you remember baby rattlesnake in the book we read last week? Yes, *wailing* means crying.”

Besides checking on understanding and reinforcing vocabulary, Kelly is helping her students make text-to-text connections (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). She seamlessly weaves instruction into the enjoyment of the readaloud.

Encouraging Reflection

Authentic literature evokes authentic responses. It's good practice to encourage young students to reflect on the reading and to make space for spontaneous sharing and extending of the ideas in the story. The day I observed Kelly read *The Teddy Bear*, she encouraged her students to reflect. After she read the conclusion, when the boy gives the homeless man the bear to keep, the students seemed to welcome a pause to think. Kelly then said, “A lot of you have been making books and drawings based on the books you've heard me read. You are welcome to go and do that if you wish.”

Already intrigued at the class's reaction to this book, I sat with students as they began writing and drawing. Seeing Nori get out writing materials, I asked her, “Are you going to write about the book Teacher Kelly read?”

Nori looked at me with that half smile of hers. “I only draw stuff I think about.”

“And what are you thinking about?”



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Early educators should help children step into a story and make it their own.

She sighed as she drew a sun. “I was happy that he gave the bear back to the old man.”

Sierra shook her head. “It made me sad, 'cause the little boy didn't know where his teddy bear was. I lost my Cinderella doll. I can't sleep without her. But she was hiding under my bed!”

“How about the rest of the story?” I asked.

Sierra then agreed with Nori: “It was happy at the end.”

Hanna chimed in: “I feel sad about the book. He be nice to the boy and the little boy was nice to the man. . . . The boy had the elephant to sleep with, or the lion. The man was crying, and he have no other animals.”

What an inference! Hanna had remembered the picture of the boy on his bed surrounded by stuffed animals. She used the pictures, her knowledge, her emotions, and her empathy to get to a deeper understanding of the story.

Notice the sophisticated comprehension skills these preschoolers were learning. They empathized with different characters, made inferences, found many text-to-self connections, and changed their thinking, as when Sierra revised her opinion of the story's mood. They also shared their reactions to the text and their own stories with one another, building a community of readers. Rippling conversations like these can continue to widen as students and teachers explore new ways to comprehend the books they read or hear others read.

Using Familiar Books to Teach Text Features

An important part of strengthening comprehension is making sure emerging readers understand distinctive text features of books they will read and hear. Rereading familiar books out loud as a whole class is a wonderful strategy.

Books that encourage children to interact and even “talk” to the main character are particularly effective. *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear* is an example of a tale that is told as though the narrator is talking to the main character, a mouse. Understanding who is narrating a story is a comprehension skill we often take for granted.

Kelly Petrin’s fellow teacher Melissa Kolb explained why she chose to reread this book:

When I read books out loud, I am trying to incorporate all the strategies for reading I have learned, as well as what I have learned about what this particular group of children do and don’t understand. The children had heard that story many times before in small groups, read by me or another adult, but that was the first time I read it in the large group, and I wanted to be specific about what was happening and [explain] what the point of view . . . was and also what the illustrator was showing in that book. . . . Although there are simple words in the book, the concepts extend way beyond what is going on.

Melissa gathered the children on the carpet and held the book up. “You know, we have been reading this book a lot, but we haven’t read it together,” she told them. “This is one of those books where you have to look carefully at the pictures to help you figure out what’s going on.”

“Hello, Little Mouse,” she read. “What are you doing?”

Melissa paused and asked the kids, “Who said that?”

“The mouse!” the kids responded.

“The mouse? No, he’s listening. That’s one interesting thing about this book—you can imagine that it’s *you* talking to



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Even preschoolers bring a world of experience to the printed page.

the mouse. You can be part of the book.” As the reading continued, Melissa reinforced the idea that the reader is talking to the mouse.

In many books young children encounter, the main character narrates the story. The first-person point of view helps draw young readers into the story and identify with a character’s experiences; early childhood educators can point out this text feature and encourage children to use the narrator’s voice as a way to step into the story and make it their own. *En Mi Familia/In My Family*, *Owl Moon*, and *Tar Beach* are three of many good children’s books narrated by the main character.

Other books (such as *As the Crow Flies: A First Book of Map* or *Me on the Map*) include maps as part of the text, which is a terrific way for preschool children to learn the relationship of

objects to one another and have fun exploring. Using simple descriptive phrases, such as *next to*, *beside*, *in front of*, and *under*, helps children understand location, imagine how shapes may look from different angles, and start to interpret maps.

Bringing In Home Languages

Many classrooms I’ve observed are filled with English language learners (ELLs). There are clearly challenges involved in

making language and books accessible to all students in multilingual classrooms. It’s important to provide students who are both emerging readers and emerging English speakers with reading materials in their native languages or to translate texts in some way so nonnative speakers can enter into the story and begin making connections. There is a growing wealth of bilingual children’s books, especially in Spanish and English. Resources like the journals *Multicultural Review* and *Children’s Book Press* are wonderful for finding bilingual books in Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, and other languages.

When bilingual adults are available, they can support students by reading aloud to a student in his or her home language, asking higher-level questions in that language, and initiating native-language conversations. At the Portland Head Start program, teachers share the expertise of three bilingual aides, who rotate among classrooms to translate and interact with students in their home languages.

For instance, as Melissa read *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear* aloud, a Vietnamese aide, Ngoc, sat with the Vietnamese

speakers, translating what Melissa was reading and helping to explain the concepts. Earlier in the day, Ngoc had read that book to the children in Vietnamese, so it was familiar to them. She had acted out concepts that might be confusing to them, such as the mouse “sniff sniffing” and asked them to consider why the mouse might need to guard the strawberry.

In many classrooms, no adult will speak a particular student’s language. It’s important to provide books and other reading materials in students’ home languages and to lend these books to the parents so they can read them and talk with their child about them. Invite parents to be actively involved. For instance, parents might write out key words in the home language and help you learn their pronunciation so you can chat with students or translate these words into English.

As you prepare to read a story in English to a young language learner for the first time, it’s helpful to talk the story through with the child before reading it, perhaps telling the tale in a modified version the child will understand. When that learner hears the story read aloud to the class, he or she will already have the gist. Vocabulary that was mysterious the first few times may become more accessible with repeated readings and class discussions.

When an English language learner has heard a book several times, you might ask that child to “read” the book to other children, particularly other ELLs. As they look at the pictures together and retell the story, the veteran “reader” can convey his or her interest and understanding of the text to the other kids in a comfortable sharing (Macrina, Hoover, & Becker, 2009).

Highlighting Comprehension in Reading Assessment

Shifting our focus to an awareness of young children’s reading comprehen-

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sion, rather than just phonics or decoding, requires a shift in how we look at their strengths and needs as budding readers. As I assess young readers’ skills, I ask myself what evidence I have that this reader can engage in these emerging comprehension strategies:

- Relating the reading to other human experiences, especially the reader’s own. Can the reader generalize information as well as enjoy the book in a personal way?

- Accepting responsibility for making meaning out of the literature and the discussions. Is the learner genuinely making the kinds of connections that help a person form independent opinions about a text, rather than depending on others to tell him or her “what it means”?

- Recognizing differences and similarities in ideas offered by different texts. Does the reader draw on previous reading and adjust his or her thinking to accommodate a wider range of ideas and views?

- Expressing responses to readings. Is the reader timid? Unfocused? What can I do to help?

- Tolerating and accepting others’ opinions of the text. Can he or she challenge others in a cooperative rather than combative way?

- Enjoying the reading. Can the child say why he or she does or doesn’t like it?

- Taking another perspective in his or her reading, seeing things through another’s eyes. What can I do to encourage this?

Comprehension strategies are an essential part of thoughtful reading instruction, even with our youngest learners. All emerging readers—even

those still learning English—can blossom when we invite them into the world of reading by honoring their experiences and helping them connect their lives to books. **EL**

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